

Down with art!: the age of manifestos

Future fetishists and artists who don't paint: how the revolutionary aims of the avant-garde led to the 'sick joke' of postmodernism

Terry Eagleton

In the world of polite letters, literature is the enemy of programmes, polemics, sectarian rancour, the sour stink of doctrinal orthodoxies. It is the home of the unique particular, the provisional and exploratory, of everything that resists being reduced to a scheme or an agenda. This, one might note, is a fairly recent point of view. That literature should be free of doctrinal orthodoxy would have come as a surprise to Dante and Milton. Swift is a great writer full of sectarian rancour. Terms like "provisional" and "exploratory" do not best characterize Samuel Johnson's literary views.

Nor do they best describe the views of the various twentieth-century avant-gardes, which set out to demolish this whole conception of art. From the Futurists and Constructivists to the Surrealists and Situationists, art became militant, partisan and programmatic. It was to be liberated from the libraries and museums and integrated with everyday life. In time, the distinction between art and life, the playful and the pragmatic, would be erased. There were to be no more professional artists, just common citizens who occasionally wrote a poem or made a piece of sculpture. The summons rang out to abandon one's easel and design useful objects for working people, as some of the Russian Constructivists did. Poets were to read their poetry through megaphones in factory yards, or scribble their verses on the shirt-fronts of passing strangers. A moustache was appended to the Mona Lisa. A Soviet theatre director took over a whole naval port for several days, battleships and all, and commandeered its 300,000 citizens for his cast.

Theatre audiences might be asked to vote at the end of the play, or march en masse on the local town hall. From agitprop to poster design, art was an instrument in the service of political revolution. For some avant-gardists, there were to be no more permanent art objects, since they would only suffer the indignity of becoming commodities. Instead, one should create gestures, happenings, situations, stray intensities, events which consumed themselves in the act of production. "To the electric chair with Chopin!", fulminated the founder of Mexican Stridentism. "The Venus de Milo is a graphic example of decline", declares Kasimir Malevich in his lengthy Suprematist Manifesto of 1916, reproduced here. The most obscene word of all was "academic".

In this cultural revolution, two broad currents can be distinguished. The more positive strain of avant-gardism sought to transform human perceptions in order to adapt them to the new technological age. Avant-gardes tend to take root in societies still in the first flush of modernization, when the oppressive aspects of the new technologies are less obvious than the exhilarating ones. History is now skidding by so fast that the only image of the present is the future. Nothing is more typical of these activists than a mindless celebration of novelty – a brash conviction that an absolutely new epoch is breaking around them, that twentieth-century humanity is on the brink of greater, more rapid change than at any time in the past (they were to be proved right about that), and that everything that happened up to ten minutes ago is ancient history. How one would set about identifying absolute novelty is a logical problem that did not detain them.

This fetishism of the future crops up on almost every page of 100 Artists' Manifestos, deftly selected and stylishly introduced by Alex Danchev. Marinetti's Futurist Manifesto of 1909, which as Danchev points out founded not only Futurism but the very idea of the artistic manifesto, celebrates "the beauty of speed". "A racing car, its bonnet decked with exhaust pipes like serpents with galvanic breath . . . is more beautiful than the Winged Victory of Samothrace." A later Futurist proclamation incites the brethren to destroy all "passéist" clothes ("tight-fitting, colourless, funereal, decadent") and invent futurist clothes instead, "daring clothes with brilliant colours and dynamic lines". Like Romanticism, the revolutionary avant-garde was staffed by the young, full of contempt for their experimentally challenged elders. In its more flamboyant moments, of which it had more than a few, it raised adolescence to an ideology.

Revolutionaries singing the praises of technological progress is rather like archbishops recommending adultery. These cultural experimenters seem to have overlooked the fact that no social system in history has been more innovative and dynamic than capitalism, and that a credulous trust in progress was a stock belief of the very middle classes they sought to outrage. It is true that this faith was coming badly unstuck in the early twentieth century, and would finally lie bleeding on the battlefields of the First World War. Even so, turning the middle classes' belief in technological progress against their own cultural conservatism was always a perilous tactic.

Scandalizing the bourgeoisie, whose grandchildren were to be charged fancy prices for the very works of art that did so, meant more than rejecting this or that convention. It involved an assault on the idea of men and women as autonomous individuals with rich interior lives. That ripe, Proustian interiority was to be ripped apart by an art that was externalizing, mechanistic and deconstructive. For the

first time in the history of aesthetics, fragmentation and dislocation ousted the impulse to unify. The Old Man (private, spiritual, contemplative) was to be taken apart, and the New Man (active, collectivist, mobile, anonymous) was to be constructed in his place. This meant waging an unpleasantly macho campaign against moralism, realism and Romanticism, all of which were soggy with feminine feeling. The Futurist Manifesto ditches feminism along with libraries, museums and academies. The avant-garde was a robustly masculine affair; its hymns to lust and Deleuze-like cult of desire boded ill for anyone furnished with a uterus. A Manifesto of Futurist Woman encourages woman “to find once more her cruelty and her violence that make her attack the vanquished because they are vanquished”. There is a good deal of such sub-Nietzschean swagger in the current as a whole. The decadent values of pity and compassion – mere fronts for the predatory bourgeoisie – must give way to a certain spiritual brutality.

Alongside the more positive strand of avant-garde revolt, with its complex relations to Bolshevism, Trotskyism and (in the case of Marinetti) Fascism, flourished a more negative, even nihilistic strain, which held that the cultural establishment could absorb attacks on this or that meaning; what it could not withstand was an assault on meaning as such. It followed that the most lethal revolutionary weapon was absurdity. In a period of savage irrationalism stretching from the Somme to the rise of Hitler, only the lunatic could be said to be sane. Reason itself was an oppressive force, and the title of madman was one to be cherished. Logic was the preserve of those incapable of creation. Since manifestos made a kind of sense, they, too, were to be junked. “No more manifestos”, demanded a Dadaist manifesto. “DADA MEANS NOTHING”, announced another.

The term “Dada” soon became the ultimate floating signifier, applicable to anything of which one happened to approve. “DADA's face is broad and slender and its voice is arched like the sirens’ tone”, states one of its champions informatively. Some manifestos, as Danchev notes, came to resemble modernist poems, full of typographical high-jinks and obscenity-sprinkled obscurantism. “Tragic humour is the birthmark of the North”, Wyndham Lewis wrote, meaninglessly, in a manifesto in his journal *Blast*.

Ridiculing all this ultra-leftism, however, is as risky as it is easy. One Dadaist document calls for “daily meals at public expense for all creative and intellectual men and women on the Potsdamer Platz”, and goes on to demand “immediate regulation of all sexual relations according to the views of international Dadaism through establishment of a Dadaist sexual centre”. Those who dismiss this kind of stuff as preposterous are in much the same position as the eighteenth-century

bishop who is said to have thrown Gulliver's Travels into the fire, declaring that he didn't believe a word of it. For it is, of course, intended as self-parody; and it is never easy to decide when these artistic incendiaries are in deadly earnest and when they are sending themselves up. Outrage, extravagance and over-the-top polemic are built into the very genre of the manifesto, which is itself a kind of fiction. When the Communist Manifesto, which provides the prototype for all these cries of rage, proclaims that the workers of the world have nothing to lose but their chains, we are not meant to take this as we would a statement that eating too much treacle will make you sick. Marx and Engels were well aware that working people who rose up against their masters might end up losing their lives rather than their chains. The statement is a piece of rhetoric, the point of which lies in its effect.

These artists' manifestos, likewise, are performances rather than propositions. They are examples of the aggressive, absurdist art they advocate. And that art was by no means just a puerile affair. Artists associated with the groups who produced the documents in this volume include Rodchenko, Kandinsky, Mayakovsky, Vertov, Eisenstein, Brecht, Mondrian, Le Corbusier, Max Ernst, André Breton and a good many other illustrious names. The Futurists, the Surrealists and the rest could be embarrassing in print but supremely accomplished in practice. If they were sometimes callow, buffoonish and ludicrously self-important, some of them also produced works which rank among the most audacious and imaginative of their time. They were certainly never dull.

What links most of these sects, many of which evaporated almost as soon as they emerged, was a demand for what Mayakovsky called spiritual revolution. They were aware that a social transformation which failed to cut deep enough, embracing economic change but sidelining the whole question of human subjectivity, was bound to founder. Their prediction was to prove tragically accurate. Mayakovsky committed suicide in 1930, disenchanted with life in the Soviet Union. Avant-garde art may be a poor joke in the eyes of some conservative academics, but it was scarcely so in the eyes of Joseph Stalin. It was a threat to the State which had to be destroyed. When the mantle of the Bolshevik cultural pioneers passed to their contemporaries in the Weimar Republic, the Nazis stepped in and squashed it there, too.

Most of it, at any rate. In diminished form, the avant-garde has lived on to this day. 100 Artists' Manifestos starts out with Marinetti and Kandinsky and ends up with Gilbert and George. One might claim that the classical avant-garde ended in 1971 with the demise of the Situationists under their leader Guy Debord, dedicated boozier and brilliant strategist. Charles de Gaulle was another politician

who looked on cultural revolutionaries as more than just a joke, since in the guise of Situationism they masterminded much of the student rebellion of the late 1960s. The surreal slogans of May '68 are in a direct line of descent from Mayakovsky and André Breton.

Alex Danchev's book also reprints the manifesto of the anti-Brit Art Stuckists, which contains the subversive suggestion that "Artists who don't paint aren't artists". Today, rejecting the easel is as conventional as the iambic pentameter, and has become all the easier given that quite a few celebrated artists never took it up in the first place. Postmodern culture is, among other things, a sick joke at the expense of the tradition recorded in this collection. Art has indeed been integrated with everyday life; but this has happened in the form of advertising, public relations, the media, political spectacles, the catwalk and the commodity, which is not quite what the Futurists and Surrealists had in mind.

Alex Danchev, editor

100 ARTISTS' MANIFESTOS

From the Futurists to the Stuckists

496pp. Penguin. Paperback, £12.99. 978 0 141 19179 9

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